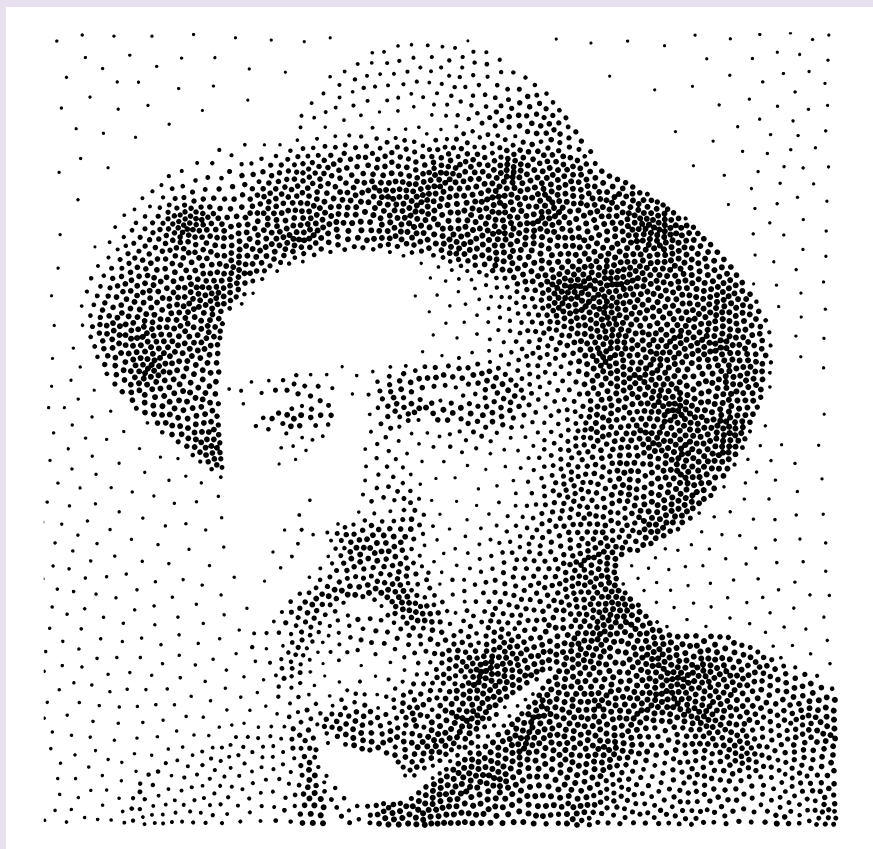


Russian Short Stories

The Park Of Kings



Alexander Kuprin

The Park Of Kings by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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(A Fantasy)

It was the beginning of the twenty-sixth century of the Christian era. The life of men on earth had changed beyond recognition. The colored races of mankind had already blended completely with the white races, adding to their blood that health, firmness, and longevity which are so characteristic of all hybrids and mongrels among animals. Wars ceased forever in the middle of the twentieth century, after dreadful slaughters in which the whole civilized world took part and which cost mankind tens of millions of human lives and hundreds of billions in money. Man's genius had rendered mild the severest climates, had drained swamps, had dug tunnels through mountains, transformed the earth into a luxuriant garden and a gigantic machine-shop, the productivity of which had increased tenfold. Improvements in machinery reduced the working day to four hours, while work became compulsory for everybody. Vices disappeared entirely and virtue blossomed out. To tell the truth, however, all this was tiresome enough. And it was no wonder that in the middle of the thirty-second century, after the great South African insurrection, which took the form of a protest against the existing wearisome order of

things, the whole of humanity, in a frenzy of intoxication, entered again upon the road of war, blood, plots, corruption, and cruel despotism, and, for Lord knows which time in the long history of our planet, destroyed and turned into dust and ashes all the great achievements of the world's civilization.

But the contented prosperity which preceded this elemental destruction came as by itself, without blood or violence.

The rulers of the earth obediently and silently gave in to the spirit of the times; voluntarily they came down from their thrones in order to lose themselves in the masses of the people, and take a part in its creative work. They realized that the charm of their power had long since become an empty phrase. It was not for nothing that for centuries in succession their princesses had been running away from the palaces with servants, grooms, gypsies, and wandering magicians. And it was not for nothing that their princes and grand dukes pawned their hereditary sceptres and laid their thousand-year-old crowns at the feet of courtesans, who used them as ornaments for their false hair.

But some of their descendants, blindly, haughtily, fearlessly, and, in a way, tragically certain of the divine and endless character of their power, which rests upon them by reason of heredity, contemptuously refused to live in common with the masses of the people and never ceased to regard themselves the rulers and the fathers of the people. They considered it below their dignity to commit suicide, which in their minds was a degrading weakness, unworthy of persons of royal blood. They refused to dim the halo of their escutcheons by contracting

marriages below their rank, and their effeminate, thin, white hands were never made dirty by physical work, which they still considered the lot of slaves.

Then the popular government, which had long since abolished prisons, violence, and punishment, decided to build for them in a beautiful public park a large, light, and comfortable house with a common sittingroom, dining-room, and parlor, and with smaller but comfortable living-rooms. Their food and clothes had to come from voluntary contributions of the people, and the former rulers tacitly agreed to regard these small gifts as the legal tribute of their vassals. And in order that the existence of these grand personages should not be wholly aimless, the practical government decided to permit school children to study the history of the past by observing these living fragments of past times.

And so, gathered in one place, left to themselves and to their inactivity, they soon began to deteriorate in body and become degraded in soul within the walls of this public asylum. Their external appearance still retained an afterglow of their former grandeur. Their fine faces, rendered noble by careful selection in the course of hundreds of generations, still retained their sloping foreheads, their eagle noses, their strong chins, fit for medal profiles. Their hands and feet were still small and shapely, as formerly. Their movements were still majestic, and their smiles charming.

But they were such only in the presence of strangers who came to visit the park. When left alone within the walls of their asylum, they changed into wrinkled, groaning, sickly old men,

envious, suspicious, quarrelsome, and unfeeling. In the evenings they usually played cards, two kings and two grand dukes. When dealing, they would be polite and calm. But their mutual dislike, which always accumulates among men pent up together, added to their nervousness and irritability, spoiled their relations. The King of Sardinia would remark most politely to the Duke of St. Bernard:

“I hope, your Highness, that you have not put away an extra ace of clubs, as you did on a former occasion?”

“Only the activity of my enemies and the lowering of the standard of morality could compel me to live in the same cage with such an old monkey as you, sir.”

They all knew perfectly well that the card representing the queen of diamonds had a corner torn off, and that the nine of spades had an ink stain on its back. But, making a little compromise with conscience, they secretly made use of these signs.

Sometimes at dinner they would still repeat high-sounding phrases, like the following:

“My people and my army. ...”

“Oh, if you only knew how my father was loved by his subjects. ... And they are still. ... Why, I could show you a letter which I have received from my party. ... Only I don’t know where it is just now.”

“Yes. And I, too, have received information about a powerful movement on foot in my country. ...”

“People must at last come back to their senses and return to

the legitimate order of things....”

But no one ever heard these mutterings, and if anyone had heard, he would not have believed them. They all had but one loyal subject, a thoroughly convinced advocate of royal prerogatives, their half-blind, deaf, one-hundred-year-old servant, a former soldier.

Their empty life was full of intrigues, gossip, spying. They would look into each others’ cups and pots, table-drawers, beds; would reproach each other with having all sorts of diseases and old-age infirmities, and were all jealous of the Count of Loire, whose wife had opened a little store near the park and thus was able to send cigars to her royal husband.

Their sons and daughters had left them long ago in order to lose their identity in the masses of the people. But on holidays the princes were visited by their wives and their old mothers, who, like all women, were not permitted to go to the “House of Kings” on weekdays. They brought with them all the gossip that they had heard in the streets and on the public squares; they spoke to their children of hopes which could never come true, and together with them dreamed of improving the methods of agriculture and spoke of how necessary and important it was for the country to grow Swiss roses, asparagus, and to raise Angora cats. And after such conversations the poor old kings saw in their night dreams fireworks and parades, and balls and triumphs, and vast mobs of people howling with joy. And after sleepless nights, they would awaken ill and uncomfortable, and would watch each other for the results of the medicine they would have to take.

The spring came again, as it had been coming for thousands of years past. Whatever happens, spring always remains a dear, bright, joyful holiday, just as its invariable companion, the Easter egg, always remains a symbol of the endlessness and fertility of life.

Fragrant poplar buds were already opening in the Park of Kings, the grass was turning green, and the still bare, soft earth, performing again the great mystery of motherhood, was exhaling a powerful and sweet odor. The old, beautiful, azure sky was again smiling through the branches of trees.

The crowned personages came out of their rooms and were walking slowly up and down the park paths, supporting themselves on their crutches. Spring always has an imperative appeal for young hearts, but even in the old blood of the kings it awakened a sad and undefined restlessness. To the young people who crowded the beautiful park on such fine days, they seemed even more distant, strange, and foreign, as though they had come out of the grave.

The old, lonesome, childless, widowed King of Trapesund, an old man of majestic appearance with a conical-shaped head, an aquiline nose, and a long silver beard, sat down on a green bench in the most secluded and faraway alley of the park. The spring sun and air enfeebled his body as though intoxicating him, and filled his soul with a quiet sadness. As though in sleep, he heard the familiar remarks which occasional passersby exchanged on seeing him.

“This is the King of Trapesund. You can see the portrait of his great-grandfather, Charles XV, surnamed the Indomitable, in

the National Museum. Their faces are identical.”

“And have you heard of his ancestor, Alfonso XIX, who ruined his country for the sake of his mistress, a French actress, and even sold the plans of his own fortifications to the spies of other countries?”

“And what about Louis the Bloody? Twenty thousand men were shot to death one morning in front of the barrack walls.”

But the proud soul of the monarch who was rejected by his own people did not quiver and did not shrink before this ominous obituary. Yes, his forefathers were right in acting thus. Not only the king’s wishes, but his whims as well, should be sacred to the people. And every man who dares to question divine power is worthy of death.

But suddenly he heard a gentle, childish voice, the sound of which caused him to raise his white head.

“Grandpa, why are you always so sad? Has anybody hurt you? Grandpa, let me give you this sugar Easter egg. You should not be sad on such a fine holiday. Look, grandpa, there is a little glass here, and back of it is a little lamb, eating grass. And when you are tired of looking at the egg, you can eat it. It is made of sugar.”

The king drew toward him this kind, light-haired, blue-eyed girl, hitherto unknown to him, and said with a sad smile:

“No, my dear child, I cannot eat it. I have no teeth with which to eat sugar.”

Now it was the girl’s turn to stroke his wrinkled cheek with her little hand, as she said in her thin voice:

“My poor grandpa. You are so poor and so old. ... Do you know what we will do? We have no grandpa. ... Do you want to be our grandpa? Can you tell fairytales?”

“Yes, my dear child. I can tell beautiful old tales. About iron men, and victories, and bloody festivals. ...”

“Well, that’s fine. I will go out for a walk with you and get flowers for you, and make garlands. We will each put on a garland, and that will be fine. You see, I have some flowers now. The blue ones are violets, and the white ones snowdrops. I will sing you all the songs that I know. Will you come?”

And then a strange thing happened. The old king whom neither arguments, nor the words of his politicians, nor the cruel lessons of life, nor history had convinced, suddenly realized with his whole soul how ludicrous and useless was his stubborn faith in what was past. There suddenly awakened in him a desire for a family, for caresses, attention, childish prattle. And kissing the girl’s light hair, he said in a scarcely audible voice:

“All right, my dear girl, I shall come. I was so lonely during my whole life. ... But what will your papa say? ...”

Then the girl ran away and returned in a minute, leading by the hand a tall and sunburnt man with calm and deep-gray eyes, who said, taking off his hat:

“If you should consent, your Majesty, to do what the girl suggests, we should all be infinitely happy, your Majesty.”

“Let my Majesty alone...” said the old man, rising from the bench and shaking hands with the citizen. “From now on my Majesty exists no more.”

And they all three walked out forever from the Park of Kings.
But as they were passing through the gate, the old man suddenly stopped, and when they turned back to him, his companions saw that a tear was falling down his white beard, like a diamond rolling down a sheet of silver.

“Do not think...” said the old man, trembling with emotion. “Do not think that I shall be... entirely useless to you. ... I can ... I can make beautiful boxes out of colored paper. ...”

And overjoyed by his words, the little girl threw her arms around his neck.